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AFRICA WEEKLY REVIEW

SUPPLEMENT

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Somalia: Prospects for Political Stability. 1

The internal political situation in Somalia has become increasingly unstable since the country's defeat in the Ogaden war, and, if President Siad cannot attract outside support, the prospects are better than even that he will be overthrown.

This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the Africa Division, Office of Regional and Political Analysis, with occasional contributions from other offices within the National Foreign Assessment Center. The Africa weekly focuses on major African issues and their implications. We solicit comments on the articles as well as suggestions on topics that might be treated in future issues.

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Somalia: Prospects for Political Stability

The internal political situation in Somalia has become increasingly unstable since the country's humiliating defeat at the hands of Soviet- and Cuban-backed Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden war. The war enjoyed widespread popular support and generated a strong spirit of national unity, but the forced withdrawal of Somali regulars in early March has exacerbated and exaggerated the basic tribal, regional, and ideological conflicts in Somali politics and society.

Somali President Siad's most fundamental problem has been to demonstrate his ability to restore confidence and direction to Somali politics in order to dampen the destabilizing forces at work in the country and the Army in the wake of the Ogaden conflict. To accomplish this, however, he believes he must attract significant foreign support to prove to his critics that he is firmly in control and that Somalia is not friendless and isolated.

The internal situation promises to remain unsettled until and unless Siad can compensate for his rejection of Soviet patronage by attracting major political and military support from Western and conservative Arab states. Failing this, the prospects are better than even that the Somali leader will be overthrown by a successor military regime that might be willing to permit at least a limited restoration of Soviet influence in Mogadiscio in return for appropriate security guarantees.

Somali President Siad is probably more politically vulnerable now than at any time since he came to power nearly a decade ago. Siad's internal base of support has, over the past six months or so, been significantly weakened by:

- Somalia's military debacle in the Ogaden, for which many Somalis hold him responsible.

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- Somalia's inability to establish a major arms supply relationship with some relatively generous source, such as the US, West European, or conservative Arab states,



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- A resurgence of tribal dissidence, highlighted by the abortive coup staged in Mogadiscio last April.

Siad is a tough and shrewd political operator, however, and should not be counted out easily, whatever his difficulties. The Somali leader has made a number of moves to insulate himself from hostile elements inside and outside Somalia. Among other things, he has:


- Supported a continuation of the Ogaden insurgency as a means of assuaging Somali national pride in the wake of the withdrawal of Somali regulars and demonstrating his unshakable commitment to Somali irredentism.
- Skillfully exploited the attempted coup of 9 April to purge real and potential opponents in the Somali military, political, and security apparatus.
- Embarked on a series of high-visibility trips to China, Western Europe, and the Arab world to plead Somalia's case.

These measures have given Siad some breathing space,

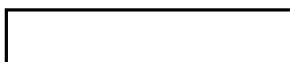


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 If his efforts to obtain substantial supplies of arms from non-Soviet sources to rebuild Somalia's weakened and demoralized Army continue to founder, this alone could lead to his ouster.

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The situation would be further compounded if, by continuing and/or increasing his support for guerrilla activity in the Ogaden--particularly in the form of renewed attacks against the vital Addis Ababa - Djibouti railroad--Siad invited major Ethiopian retaliatory moves against Somalia that his defense forces could not handle. [REDACTED]

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Under such circumstances and barring the unlikely introduction of friendly Arab troops to bail out Siad's forces, the Somali President would run the strong risk of being deposed. A successor military regime might look to Moscow for help in restraining the Ethiopians and securing Somalia's borders in return for the restoration of at least a limited degree of Soviet influence in Mogadiscio.

Siad must also contend with the same longstanding tribal tensions that helped spark the 9 April uprising and that have been greatly exacerbated by the trials of coup plotters and alleged sympathizers currently under way in Mogadiscio. There is a strong probability that the National Security Court will mete out the death penalty to virtually all of the 150 or so defendants. Large-scale executions will almost certainly create a serious tribal crisis that could result in widespread bloodletting and Siad's eventual undoing. [REDACTED]

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Siad may decide to grant clemency in most of the cases in order to reduce tension, but this too could rebound to his disadvantage by making him appear weak and indecisive in the eyes of powerbrokers from his own tribe on whose support he depends. [REDACTED]

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